

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

25 October 1984

Domestic Costs to the Soviet Regime
of Involvement in Afghanistan

Summary

In addition to the economic burden, the internal costs to the Soviets of their nearly five-year war in Afghanistan include the aggravation of an array of pre-existing societal problems. The war has worsened morale among Soviet conscripts, led more citizens to avoid the draft, and introduced Soviet youths to new forms of drug abuse. It has fed ethnic tensions, increased working class resentment of intelligentsia privileges, and strained regime credibility among a population increasingly cynical about Soviet propaganda claims. In addition, it has been a source of frustration and friction within the military, the KGB and the party, enhancing the potential for serious political conflict within the Soviet elite that could damage regime cohesion. []

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These internal costs are tempered by a number of factors. The regime possesses powerful coercive instruments to keep the population in line, the population still has ingrained habits of political passivity, and many citizens and officials take pride in the USSR's expanded global role. At the same time, the USSR stands to reap positive benefits if it is able to consolidate control in Afghanistan--such as enhanced leverage vis-a-vis Pakistan and Iran. Regime concern about the internal repercussions of involvement in Afghanistan will continue to exert some influence on Soviet policy, but strategic considerations are likely to remain paramount. []

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Economic Costs

The the Soviet economic investment in Afghanistan has been considerable, but manageable:

- Direct Soviet military expenditures in Afghanistan, while up by about 20 percent since 1980, still account for only about one percent of total Soviet military spending. (We estimate that from 1980 through 1983 the Soviets spent a total of about \$12 billion in direct support of Soviet military forces in Afghanistan, or an average of about \$3 billion annually.)
- We estimate cumulative economic aid to the Babrak regime through 1983 at roughly \$1 billion and military aid at under \$2 billion in current prices--more than to any other clients except Cuba and Vietnam. In addition, the Soviets this fall agreed to provide \$100 million in new aid over the next five years.
- The economic impact has been more pronounced for particular regions and sectors of the economy than the overall figures would suggest. Military priorities, for example, have caused disruptions in transportation and construction in Soviet republics just north of Afghanistan. Shortages of railroad rolling stocks have been especially evident during the harvest season. The drain on Soviet manpower of maintaining 110,000 troops in Afghanistan has been limited,

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Social Costs

Little overt protest. The regime has taken pains to limit the population's knowledge of developments in Afghanistan, conditioning Soviet citizens to accept the Soviet role there and acting quickly to stifle public criticism:

- At the outset of the war Soviet media never mentioned Soviet casualties or engagement in combat. Growing public awareness of developments in Afghanistan forced some modification of this approach in late 1981, but the media are still portraying the "limited

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contingent" of Soviet forces as being drawn into combat only when attacked by "bandits" and refrain from mentioning participation in planned offensive operations. Moreover, the Soviets have publicly acknowledged only about 50 of the over 20,000 estimated casualties they have suffered. Increasingly, however, media coverage of the war has come to acknowledge the extent of opposition the Soviets have encountered in a seeming attempt to prepare the population for a long ordeal in Afghanistan.

- When dissident Andrey Sakharov in 1980 condemned the Soviet invasion, the regime moved rapidly to silence him. The KGB summoned him for questioning in short order, and he was subsequently exiled to Gorky.
- Regime attention to preventive measures is further indicated by the reported dispatching of plainclothed KGB personnel to attend funerals of war dead, presumably to guard against demonstrations.

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Partly as a consequence of these efforts of police and propaganda instruments, active opposition to the war has been limited. Even human rights activists in the Soviet dissident community have not made Afghanistan a central concern, although dissident literature contains numerous critical references to regime actions in Afghanistan. The war has had a demoralizing effect on most elements of the population and has intensified a wide range of social ills, but the attitude of society so far remains one of resignation rather than rebellion.

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Troop morale. Soviet conscripts have a low level of commitment to prosecution of the war in Afghanistan:

- This may be largely attributable to the hazards of combat, the rigors of daily life in the ranks, and poor relations between officers and troops.
- But disillusionment with Soviet propaganda also plays a role. The newly arrived conscript--who has been told by Soviet media that he will be fighting US, Chinese, and Pakistan mercenaries and will be received by a grateful Afghan population--soon discovers that official propaganda bears little relation to the realities of the situation.

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[REDACTED]

Drug abuse. Substantial numbers of young Soviets are being introduced to new forms of drug abuse--involving hashish and to a lesser extent heroin--and these are threatening to spread into a Soviet society already beset by a serious alcohol problem:

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Soviet press articles have attacked the illegal transport of narcotics across the "southern border" into the USSR, and the Soviets have undertaken a number of operations to reduce the extent of drug trafficking in Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

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Corruption. Large numbers of Soviets are involved in the movement of contraband goods from the USSR to Afghanistan's thriving black market, and in a reverse flow of Western consumer goods from Kabul back to the USSR by illegal channels, as well as in the illegal trading of rubles to gain foreign currency in Afghanistan. Both officers and conscripts reportedly have participated in illegal sales of military equipment and the taking of bribes to release prisoners. It is probable that opportunities to practice "capitalism" in Afghanistan are reinforcing practices and attitudes that contribute to the further growth of corruption and erosion of discipline among officials in the USSR itself. [REDACTED]

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Ethnic tensions. The Afghan conflict appears to have heightened longstanding Soviet apprehensions about nationality friction in the military and about the political reliability of non-Slavs:

- Although Central Asian troops played a major role in the initial Soviet invasion, the regime subsequently has used Central Asian soldiers largely in the non-combat support jobs that they have traditionally filled. This appears to have been largely because most of the Central Asians in the invading force were reservists activated only on a temporary basis and then released in accordance with normal Soviet practice.

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- There are numerous media reports (but little hard evidence) of efforts by Afghan insurgents to engage in small-scale cross-border raids in areas of Central Asia where the populations are thought to be sympathetic.

- Concern to prevent cross-border raids and smuggling from Afghanistan could have been behind the regime's move to stiffen the Soviet border law in 1982.

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Although unrest in Soviet Central Asia diminished following the early period of Soviet intervention, some incidents have occurred since that time. A Soviet intellectual with reasonably high-level connections told US Embassy officers in October 1984 that angry relatives of soldiers killed in Afghanistan had recently burned down the city military command building in Kazan and created a disturbance in Baku.

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[REDACTED]

Evasion of Military Service. Not surprisingly, the Afghan conflict has increased the efforts of Soviet citizens to dodge the draft. Even more than previously, Soviet youth aided by their parents resort to various stratagems--legal and illegal--to evade induction. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] High-level military spokesmen, including the Defense Minister and the Chief of the General Staff, have in recent years decried with unusual fervor the growth of pacifist tendencies among young people, suggesting increased regime sensitivity on the subject. [REDACTED]

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Class tensions. Since it is easier for middle-class Soviets to avoid military service through bribery or enrollment in universities, the Afghan conflict has exacerbated working class resentment of the privileges enjoyed by the intelligentsia. Soviet media recently have criticized children of the elite for trying to get around fulfilling their military obligations, thereby leaving less advantaged citizens to bear the brunt of the

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fighting in Afghanistan. In apparent recognition of disgruntlement among workers, the regime acted in 1980 to limit college deferments through revision of the military service law.

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Consumer attitudes. Soviet citizens have long tended to exaggerate the costs of aid to the Third World and to blame Soviet foreign involvement as one cause for consumer shortages at home. Emigre reporting indicates Afghanistan has apparently increased public resentment of the diversion of domestic resources to support foreign policy objectives.

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Regime credibility and legitimacy. The Afghan conflict may have reinforced the growth of social malaise among the Soviet population:

- Since World War II a key source of domestic strength for the regime has been its success in giving the population what it most wants--peace. The fighting in Afghanistan may have weakened this prop to the system to some extent.
- Growing realization among the population that the Soviet media are not telling the whole story about the Afghan conflict may have enhanced public cynicism about official propaganda on other subjects as well.
- Most important, the lack of Soviet success in the war and the pervasive sense among the population that it may drag on indefinitely may have contributed to an increase in pessimism about the Soviet future.
- The war has had its most direct effect on the attitudes of Soviet youth, the element of the population about whose behavior the regime is most concerned.

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Friction Within the Elite

There are indications that the stalemate in Afghanistan has been a source of tension and frustration within Soviet elites.

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This evidence does not permit any tidy identification of institutional groupings within the elite associated with particular points of view on the course of the war. Nor does it indicate clearly whether there are different attitudes about the war within the top leadership. Overall, however, the reporting indicates that the political leadership has been dissatisfied with the performance of the military in Afghanistan, while within the professional military dissatisfaction over the regime's policy toward Afghanistan has been especially pronounced. [REDACTED]

This conclusion increases in importance when viewed in light of signs over the last several years of more generalized discontent within the military about the quality of the political leadership. [REDACTED]

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Conclusion

These internal costs of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan are tempered by a number of factors:

- The Soviets are only devoting something in the range of two percent of their military manpower to the war. The limited scope of the Soviet effort limits the impact on Soviet society.
- The regime possesses enormous powers of coercion and control that make it less vulnerable to pressures from below than are governments in most other states. It has taken both precautionary measures to prevent societal problems from escalating and reactive measures to deal with existing levels of dissatisfaction.
- Habits of political passivity and obedience to authority still are deeply ingrained among the Soviet population.
- The discouragement of Soviet officials and citizens about slow progress in Afghanistan is offset in many cases by national pride in the USSR's world role, and in some cases by a belief that Soviet endurance will ultimately prevail--as it has in other wars. [REDACTED]

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Leadership concern about the domestic repercussions of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan will continue to have some effect on regime policy. But it is by no means certain in what direction this concern will influence Soviet actions:

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- A protracted conflict would perhaps have the most negative domestic consequences. Already the Soviets have fought in Afghanistan longer than they did in World War II, and Soviet leaders are doubtless worried that the continued rotation of young Soviet soldiers through Afghanistan and their exposure to conditions there could have an increasingly corrosive effect on Soviet society. A protracted conflict could also enhance alienation within the Soviet military officer corps.
- A major escalation intended to shorten the war by achieving quick military would require sending more troops and would raise the toll of Soviet casualties. Soviet leaders consequently might believe that an escalation would run the risks of touching off civil disturbances in the USSR.
- A political accommodation in which Moscow accepted less than total domination of Afghanistan would damage the regime's prestige internally. Soviet leaders might fear that a loss of face in Afghanistan would serve as an object lesson to non-Russian minorities and make the USSR's rapidly growing Muslim population more politically assertive. []

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Leadership concern about domestic costs is not the most important factor shaping policy in Afghanistan. The Soviets fear the consequences for Soviet security interests and international authority of any move to withdraw. Moreover, the regime stands to reap positive benefits (not elaborated in this paper) if it is able to consolidate control--such as enhanced leverage vis-a-vis Pakistan and Iran. Afghanistan also provides the USSR a useful testing ground for military equipment and personnel. We believe these and other strategic considerations continue to override domestic costs in determining the course Moscow takes in Afghanistan. []

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